

# Waking Up to a Temporal Anomaly

by Robert Bedrosian\*

*For Kurt Vonnegut and Kilgore Trout*

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Imagine a nightmare that you wake up from in grateful relief. In this particular nightmare, a roster of names is being called. Your name is called, but instead of responding: "Here!" you respond: "Not here!" and then vanish, or, in this case, wake up.

In this essay we will consider Past, Present, and Future from the standpoint of an individual's lifetime. The tools needed for this exposition are relatively simple: a human being ("you") whose approximate birthdate is known, arithmetic (mostly for adding), and comparative reasoning.

It is traditional for investigators to disclose any compromising biases before presenting their data. Accordingly, we would like to acknowledge a lifelong fondness for addition, from our days in grammar school right up to the present. The sense of accomplishment achieved by producing a correct sum is solid, though usually not of long duration.

A fondness for addition, however, does not alter the sums produced. There is another built-in bias which *does* alter matters: human-centricity, a bias which exists in everything people do, say, and write. It can produce erroneous assumptions, from which erroneous conclusions are derived. For example, just as we humans have a birthdate and a deathdate, we assume that everything else does, too. This includes the Universe itself. We must observe, right at the beginning, that if the Universe actually does *not* have beginning and ending dates, then the addition work we will be doing produces more dramatic results. In such a case, we do not even have a calculator that can aid us, since the figures are impossibly large.

We will begin by characterizing Past, Present, and Future from the perspective of an individual life, trying a method using fixed values first—to reduce confusion. We will accept for now that the Universe is some 14 billion years old, and that Planet Earth is about 5 billion years old. Also, we accept that the human lifespan is approximately 80-100 years. Let us draw or imagine a horizontal timeline with our birthdate as the only entry. For convenience, put this date in the middle. Everything to the left of our birthdate is the Past. Our life begins on our birthdate and unfolds for the next 1-100 years. Everything to the right of our deathdate is the Future. Put into words it might be like this: "Fourteen billion years elapsed before you were born. After your death,

unknown billions of years will elapse." Consequently, the span of a single human life is considered "statistically insignificant" next to the Past and the Future. Should we *reject* the idea that the Universe has a beginning date, then the comparative weight of our lives becomes even more insignificant. The narrative then would be: "Unknown billions of years elapsed before your birth. Unknown billions of years will elapse after your death."

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Something else has changed in this "timequake": our birthdates can no longer be considered "in the middle" of much of anything, except on the imaginary timeline, where the initial location was suggested strictly for comparative purposes, and for convenience.

Using such a comparative method, we could describe the life of an individual as a temporal anomaly. It would be impossible to represent it on a pie chart, surrounded by a Past and a Future of indeterminate lengths.

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Thus far we have been looking from the outside and from a distance. However, it is not only in contrast to the Past and the Future that our Present gets diminished. During our 1-100 year lifetimes, a shocking 33.33% of it (fully one third) is spent sleeping. During that sleep period, which is not well understood, we see dreams containing real and fantastic images. A one-third reduction in the length of our conscious lives due to sleep may seem trifling, compared to the "untold billions of years" before and after us, but it means that we are "not present" 33.33% of the time of our given lifespans—a not inconsiderable portion.

During our waking hours, many of us daydream—another poorly understood but much-engaged-in activity. During this time, images (often created by ourselves) perform their routines in our mental theaters. For relaxation, we may turn to works of literature or art, some of which create artificial worlds so enjoyable that we prefer them. An attention-deficit condition also exists and may be a property of the human animal, both on the individual level and on the species level.

Even subtracting the 33.33% slept away, and the unknown amount of time spent in daydreams and otherwise "not paying attention," a lifespan of 100 years does not mean 100 years of productive, conscious, engaged living. Until about age 18 (in the U.S.) a young person usually is under the direct control of parents. The years from 20 to 80 usually are considered the "independent years." From 80 to 100, traditionally, are years of decline both in physical and mental abilities. Thus the Latin term *floruit* "he/she flourished" is used in biographies, usually to indicate the period of the person's flowering or creative activity. Frequently this period begins around age 30, and continues until the person stops or is stopped, by death or by the diminution of creative activity.

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It is unlikely that the virtuoso arithmetic employed in this essay will lead to a Nobel Prize for Mathematics. Howbeit, our conclusions are mostly based on mathematics (addition, and some subtraction), and on comparative reasoning. One conclusion is this: Most of the time we are not here. This is true from the external sense, where Past and Future are boundless, while our Present time on Earth as organisms is limited to approximately 100 years. The second conclusion is that by our nature as humans—by our sleeping, daydreaming, fantasizing, and attention-deficits—we are "not here" much of the time available to us.

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